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Bible

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How the Bible came down to Us

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IN a recent number of this Magazine an account was given of the way in which the books of the ancients have come down to us, and it was shown how thin, in many cases, is the thread of tradition which connects our present copies of the great works of classical antiquity with the autographs of their authors. It may have occurred to some readers to ask: How does all this apply to the Book of books? How has the Bible come down to us? Does its text rest on as precarious a foundation as that of Aeschylus or Tacitus?

It is now nearly 1850 years since the Jewish tent-maker whom we know as the apostle Paul dictated to one of his companions, who transcribed it on a short roll of papyrus, his letter to the Galatian churches, adding thereto at the end, as was his wont, a few lines with his own hand in large characters. It is some 2350 years since Ezra, if the tradition be veracious, gathered together the greater number of the books which compose the Jewish canon of Scripture. It is 2600 years since the prophecies of Amos and Isaiah were written down, whether by the prophets themselves or by their disciples; while for parts, at least, of the historical books of the Old Testament a yet higher antiquity may be claimed. How, then, has the text of these books been handed down to us; and what guarantee have we that the latest form in which scholars present it to us is indeed a true representation of the words which prophets and apostles wrote so long ago?

Let us take the Old Testament first. Its history is in some respects simpler, in others more difficult, than that of the New Testament. For about 1800 years we can trace it back, though only half that period is covered by actually extant copies. The Hebrew Old Testament was first committed to print in the year 1488, eleven years after a

portion of it, the Book of Psalms, had issued from the press. Behind these printed texts lie a great quantity of manuscripts, hundreds, or even thousands, in number; the English bishop Kennicott published collations of 634 manuscripts in 1776-1780, while the Italian scholar De Rossi, shortly afterwards, added 825 more to the list, without by any means exhausting the number of extant copies. But an examination of all this great mass of authorities brings to light two striking facts: first, that all of them contain substantially the same text, varied only by obvious mistakes and slight divergences in detail; and secondly, that none of them is earlier than the ninth century. The earliest extant MS. of the Hebrew Old Testament is a copy of the Pentateuch, now in the British Museum, and assigned to the ninth century, and the earliest MS. bearing a precise date is a copy of the Prophets, at St. Petersburg, dated A.D. 916, while the majority of the MSS. belong to much later periods. At the same time so uniform is the text preserved in all the MSS. that the earliest and the latest of them differ in no essential respect.

The explanation alike of the uniformity of text and of the comparative lateness of the extant MSS. lies in a single cause, namely, the extreme care with which the Jews have cherished their Scriptures for the last 1800 years. From about the third century most minute rules have existed for the guidance of the scribes who copied them, and to secure the most scrupulous accuracy of reproduction. Imperfect or mutilated copies were at once withdrawn from the service of the synagogue. Consequently the tendency has been for the earlier manuscripts to be set aside, and so eventually to perish, their place being taken by new copies which were in better preservation. Thus on the one hand the Jew-

ish zeal that the Testaments in use in the synagogues should be perfect has led to the disappearance of the older MSS., while on the other hand their care for accuracy of transcription has ensured that the later copies are not, as is usually the case with manuscripts, substantially inferior to the earlier.

For about a thousand years, then, from the nineteenth century back to the ninth, we have the evidence of printed editions and manuscripts; and for some eight hundred years more we have sufficient evidence from the writings of Jewish rabbis, and the like, to satisfy us that the text of the Old Testament known to them was the same as that which we still have. The schools of Jewish commentators, known as the Massoretes (from the "Massorah," or commentary, which they attached to the sacred text), and their predecessors the Talmudists, or compilers of the traditions entitled the "Talmud," all evidently had before them the same type of text, which we can thus trace back to about the year 100 after Christ. At this period the Jewish rabbis, rallying from the blows struck by the destruction of Jerusalem and the rise of the Christians, met in conference at Jamnia to discuss the precise limits of the canon of inspired Scriptures; and at the same time the text which we now call "Massoretic," and which is the only type of Hebrew

text now extant, seems to have been determined on.

But what of the thousand years or more which still separate the supposed origin of this Massoretic text from the actual dates of composition of the earlier parts of the sacred books? For this period we have no direct evidence from Hebrew manuscripts, and must have recourse to early translations of the Hebrew books into other languages. This is a class of evidence which is practically unknown in the case of classical literature (since we possess no very early translations of the Greek and Latin classics), but which is of very great importance in regard to the Bible. In the case of the Old Testament there are two translations, or "versions," as they are commonly termed, which we know to have been made before the formation of the Massoretic text, and which therefore throw some light on the state of the Hebrew text before that event. One of these is the Samaritan version, the other the Greek version known as the Septuagint. The Samaritan version is the Bible which the mixed population planted in Samaria by the Assyrians, after the conquest and deportation of the Ten Tribes, adopted from their Jewish neighbors; but since at that time the Prophets and the miscellaneous books of the Old Testament had not yet been fully recognized as part of the sacred canon,

this Samaritan Bible consists only of the Pentateuch. The Samaritan version, therefore, probably represents the Hebrew Pentateuch as it was about the fifth century before Christ; and the habitual enmity subsisting between Jews and Samaritans makes it improbable that the Samaritan text would be affected by any changes subsequently in-

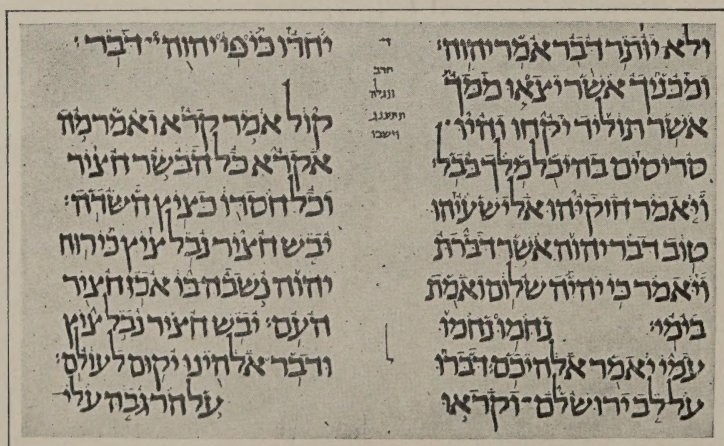


FIG. 1.—Hebrew MS. of the Prophets, written in A.D. 916, now at St. Petersburg. The vowel points are written according to the Babylonian system, above the letters. The lower part of a page is shown, reduced to five-eighths of the original size, containing the beginning of the great Messianic prophecy in Isaiah xl.

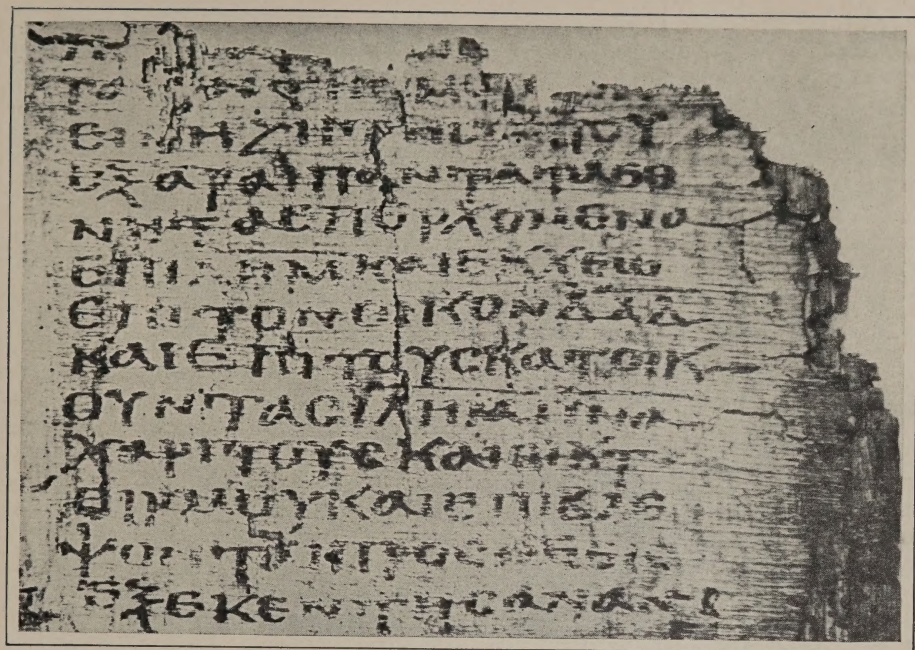


FIG. 2.—Papyrus book of the seventh century, containing parts of Zechariah and Malachi in the Greek Septuagint version; now at Heidelberg. About half a page is shown, reduced to three-quarters of the original size.

roduced among the Jews. The variations which occur in the Samaritan version are fairly numerous, but most of them are unimportant; the more notable among them are generally supported by the Septuagint, and of these it must be said that there is a considerable probability that they are right.

Unfortunately the Samaritan version is only available for the Pentateuch; and it is in the other books that the greatest textual difficulties arise. Here our only help is the Greek Septuagint version, so named from the "seventy" translators by whom it is traditionally said to have been made, in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt (B.C. 284-247). There is at least no doubt that it was made about this time, and in Egypt, for the benefit of the large colony of Greek-speaking Jews in that country; and after the introduction of Christianity it became the Old Testament of Greek-speaking Christians generally. We possess early and good manuscripts of it, dating from the fourth, or even (in the case of a few recently discovered scraps on papyrus) from the third century of our era; but its value, as evidence for the pre-Mas-

oretic Hebrew text, is seriously discounted by two considerations. In the first place, our manuscripts differ very considerably among themselves, many of them having been much affected by editors who tried to bring the Greek more into accordance with the Hebrew as they knew it; so that it is not at all easy to ascertain what the original text of the Septuagint was. Secondly, when we have ascertained, as in many places we can, that it differs very decidedly from the received Hebrew text, we still have to make up our minds as to whether the divergence is due to the Greek translator having made a mistake, or translated very freely, or to his having had a different Hebrew text before him. The best scholars are cautious about admitting alternative readings on the evidence of the Septuagint, thinking that we must first ascertain more clearly the history of the Septuagint text itself.

For the present, therefore, we may say that the Old Testament has come down to us almost wholly through the Massoretic edition of the Hebrew text, and to this both the English and the American revisers have in the main adhered.

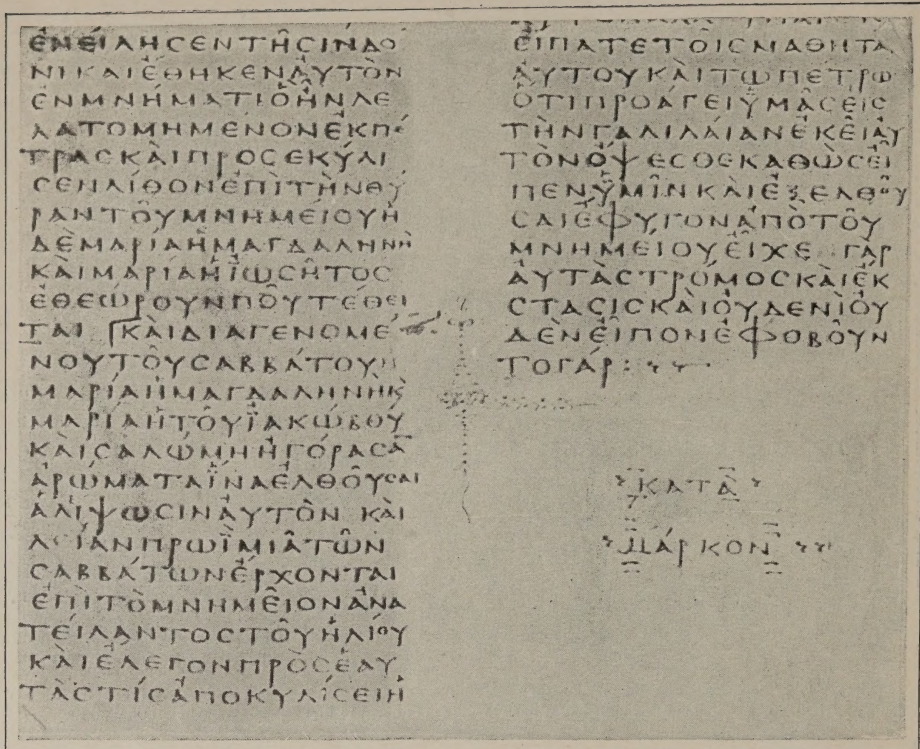


FIG. 3.—Codex Vaticanus, fourth century. The lower part of two columns, unreduced, containing the end of St. Mark, from which the last twelve verses are omitted in this MS., and in several other early authorities. The place of the third column on this page is left blank.

When we come to look at the New Testament we find a very different set of circumstances, leading naturally to very different results. The Jewish Scriptures, from a time to which we cannot reach back, were recognized as sacred books, carefully copied by trained scribes, and never subject to systematic destruction by external enemies. When, however, the early Christian missionaries wrote the books which now form our New Testament, they did not write them as sacred books on the same level as the Pentateuch or the Psalms, nor were they at first so regarded by those to whom they were sent. St. Paul wrote letters to the various communities in which he was interested, just as hundreds of his contemporaries wrote letters to their friends. We have now, thanks to the discoveries made of recent years in Egypt, numbers of such letters, written in the first and subsequent centuries of our era, and written, as his must have been written, on papyrus; so that we know just

how his letters to the Romans or Philipians must have looked. We can even produce parallels to those subscriptions in "large letters" in his own hand, which he mentions at the end of his epistle to the Galatians. These communications would no doubt be read in the congregation to which they were addressed, and copies of them would often be sent to neighboring churches; but it would only be gradually that they came to be looked upon as sacred or inspired literature. Similarly the Gospels and Acts were but memoirs of the Master's life, written down after the lapse of some years, in order to perpetuate the oral narratives of those who had been eye-witnesses and recipients of His teachings. Many such narratives were compiled, as we know from St. Luke, which have now perished, because they never attained the distinction of being recognized as authoritative by the Church at large. Only gradually, in the course of the second century, did the five narra-

tives which now stand at the head of our New Testaments single themselves out and receive recognition as the authentic and inspired records of the life of Christ on earth and for the dissemination of His Gospel throughout the Roman world.

Even so, however, the Christian writings did not acquire the ordinary privileges and safeguards of secular literature. Throughout the second and third centuries, Christianity, though often tolerated by Roman emperors and governors, was never officially recognized, and was always liable to a recurrence of proscription and persecution. At such times the sacred books were special objects of attack. This is no mere matter of conjecture; from the contemporary records of the later persecutions we know that systematic search was made for these books, and that those who were so weak or so faithless as to surrender them to the destroyer were subjected to punishment afterwards by their co-religionists. In this way many copies of the New Testament writings perished; and it is to be observed that the official copies, the property of the various churches, which would presumably be the most correct in point of text, would be the most liable to destruction in this way.

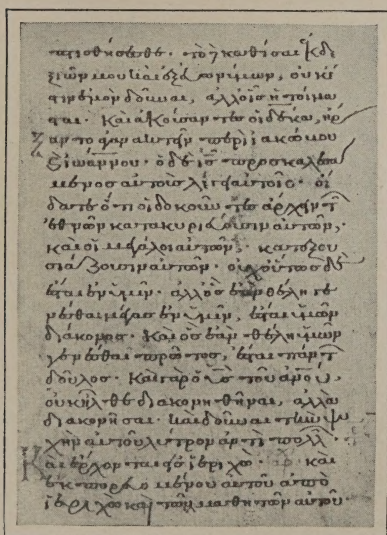


FIG. 4.—Minuscule Greek MS. of the Gospels (Egerton MS. 2783 in the British Museum), written in twelfth century. A complete page, reduced, containing Mark x., 40-46.

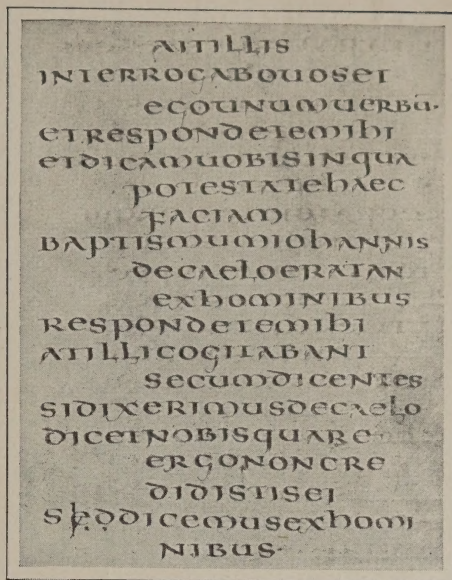


FIG. 5.—The Latin Vulgate version of the Gospels (Hard MS. 1775 in the British Museum), written in uncial characters in the sixth and seventh centuries. One of the earliest extant MSS. of the Vulgate. About three-quarters unreduced.

On the other hand, the copies which were in private possession would be less likely to attract attention, and might more easily be concealed. That such private copies existed we cannot doubt. We now possess many copies of works of classical literature, written upon papyrus at this very period, and many of them are obviously rough copies intended for private use, written in irregular, unornamental hands, and often with little care for precise accuracy. In copies such as these we must conceive the Christian Scriptures as circulating from hand to hand, with scanty opportunities for correction by comparison with official copies; and in this way it is easy to see how many of the variations crept in which now puzzle the textual critics.

Until the beginning of the fourth century, then, the circumstances attending the circulation of the New Testament books were very inimical to their continued existence. The material on which they were written, papyrus, is so perishable that it is only in the dry soil and climate of Egypt that it has survived at all. Even in Lower Egypt, where the Greek-speaking population was most nu-

merous, the soil is too damp for its preservation. Our hopes of very early copies are therefore restricted to Central and Upper Egypt; and when we have taken into consideration the dangers of persecution and the existence of a large non-Greek population, we cannot be surprised to find that no considerable MS. of the New Testament has survived from this period. Only a few small fragments remain, and these are not earlier than the third century.

The first quarter of the fourth century, however, brought about a great change. Christianity became the official religion of the empire; and papyrus was superseded by vellum as the material on which the best copies of books were written. The first event secured freedom of circulation for the Scriptures, and placed the best resources of the copyists' art at their disposal. The second provided a material strong enough to resist the ravages of time and decay; while the substitution of the modern book form for the old roll form made it possible to bring together all the Christian Scriptures in a single volume. To this period, or very shortly afterwards, may be assigned the two oldest among the extant MSS. of the Greek Bible—the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus. The Codex Vaticanus (Fig. 3) is written in a beautiful small hand, with three columns to the page, and has been preserved in the Vatican Library at Rome since the fifteenth century, though it is only within the last thirty years that its contents have been made accessible to scholars. The Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai by Tischendorf, and now in the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg, is written in a rather larger hand, with four columns to the page. Both contained, when complete, the whole of both Testaments; and both are written, like all early MSS. on vellum, in *uncial* characters,—that is, in capital letters formed separately. They rank foremost among the witnesses to the text of the New Testament, and their evidence has had great weight with the revisers of the English Bible. Other important uncial MSS. of the Greek Bible are the Codex Alexandrinus, in the British Museum, and the palimpsest

Codex Ephraemi, at Paris, both of the fifth century, and the Codex Bezae, at Cambridge, of the sixth century, the last containing the Gospels and Acts only, with many remarkable variants in the text, and with a Latin version parallel to the Greek.

From the fourth to the ninth century copies of the Bible, as of other literature, continued to be written in uncial characters, which tended continually to become large and heavier. In the ninth century came a reaction, and the current hand of every-day life was modified into a book hand, which, while possessing much more beauty than the later uncials, could be written continuously, and therefore with greater ease and speed (Fig. 4). With this invention of the "minuscule" or "cursive" style the multiplication of copies of the Scriptures proceeded apace, until the discovery of printing in the fifteenth century superseded the use of manuscripts altogether. In spite of the ravages of time, more than three thousand copies of the Greek New Testament, whole or in part, still exist; and to these must be added the copies of the early translations into other languages—Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, Latin, etc.—which give invaluable assistance to the scholar in ascertaining the correct text of the Scriptures.

If, then, we compare this state of things with what has previously been written about the manuscripts of the classics, we shall see how immensely superior is the position of the New Testament. We owe our knowledge of most of the great works of Greek and Latin literature—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thucydides, Horace, Lucretius, Tacitus, and many more—to manuscripts written from 900 to 1500 years after their authors' deaths; while of the New Testament we have two excellent and approximately complete copies at an interval of only 250 years. Again, of the classical writers we have, as a rule, only a few score of copies (often less), of which one or two usually stand out as decisively superior to the rest; but of the New Testament we have more than 3000 copies (besides the very large number of versions), and many of these have distinct and independent value.